

Torild Skard

## ***Women of Power- Half a century of female presidents and prime ministers worldwide***

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*Women of Power* starts with a story about Torild Skard, the book's author. What made Skard embark on such an ambitious project as to collect case studies on 73 female presidents and prime ministers from 53 different countries, is the fact that she is a *woman of power* herself. With her grandmother and mother as role models, Skard is a third-generation feminist in her family. Moreover, Skard was an MP, the first female president of the Norwegian Upper House, the director for the Status of Women in UNESCO, the regional director of UNICEF West and Central Africa and the general director in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This impressive international and political career gives Skard the legitimacy to write about her female colleagues who often struggled to reach top leadership positions.

Skard uses a unique pattern to describe in detail the development of the feminist breakthrough and show that female subordination is not a necessary condition of human societies, but rather a cultural product that can be subject to change with a certain amount of political will. Each story starts with the family and educational background on an emerging female leader. After that, the historico-political context and the party structure of a specific country are provided. Skard is particularly interested in the introduction of quotas, if and what position women held in government cabinets as well as to what extent the countries carried out the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The focus is placed on the rise and the fall of women who became presidents and prime ministers from 1960-2010. Each story is finalized by listing the achievements of the leaders in improving the status of women, describing how much they were *feminists* and if so, how they made a difference.

The first chapter starts with a description of first female leaders who came to

power in various parts of the world between 1960-75. The most interesting stories are those of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the first female prime minister (PM) in the world from Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) who ruled for more than 17 years and Indira Gandhi, the PM of India who was in power for 15 years. What these two women had in common was that neither of them, initially, wanted to rise to the top of society. Bandaranaike was requested to take over after her husband, and Gandhi after her father. On the contrary, Golda Meir, the PM of Israel for more than 5 years, reached the top on her own merits. However, Skard points out that all three of them were criticized because they did not do more for women and did not declare themselves as feminists.

While the second chapter deals with the analysis of trends which affect the under-representation of women, the third chapter brings interesting stories of several Western rulers, *inter alia*, those of Margaret Thatcher and Gro Harlem Brundtland. When Thatcher became PM, it was because of her hard work, not because of her gender. Skard and other feminists resent her for surrounding herself with male politicians only and wanted to prove she can do as well, or better than men. Thatcher underlined several times that she sees no difference between male and female styles of governance. However, there was definitely a difference in governing between Thatcher and Gro. Gro was the youngest prime minister in Norwegian history and became an active advocate for gender equality. In total, she appointed 20 women to her cabinet, which was therefore called „the female cabinet“.

The fourth and fifth chapters cover the female leaders from South and East Asia. Particularly impressive is the story about Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's second democratically elected civilian leader. She was not only elected as PM twice, but was also an undisputed leader of one of Pakistan's two largest parties. Despite numerous threats from fundamentalists who claimed she could not serve as PM according to Muslim law, Bhutto did a lot for Muslim women. Among other things, she established a Ministry of Women's Development and created a female police force. Cory Aquino, on the other hand, was not well prepared for her role as the president of the Philippines. She was invited by party members to continue the work of her deceased husband. When she accepted to run for president, Aquino was quickly given the name „Mother of Democracy“ and stayed

in power for six years. Skard's conclusion referring to Asian female leaders is that they were often only men's substitutes.

Violeta Chamorro, Nicaragua's and Latin America's first elected female president, Michelle Bachelet, current president of Chile and Christina Fernandez de Kirchner, current president of Argentina are in the focus of Skard's sixth chapter. Among them, Bachelet stands out. Not only was she the first female president in Latin America elected on her own merits, without influential family ties, but she was also actively improving the status of women in many areas. The case of Eugenia Charles is similar as the first elected head of government in Dominica who ruled for 15 years and has left a lasting impact among the countries in the Caribbean. Both Bachelet and Charles embody women friendly policy, which Skard voices through her entire book. The seventh chapter, devoted to Caribbean female leaders, is remarkable because it shows that all female leaders managed on their own. None of them rose to the top as widows, daughters or substitute leaders. The case with the leaders of Sub-Saharan Africa, covered in the eighth chapter, was similar. One of the very few who succeeded in doing so was Ellen Sirleaf, the president of Liberia, elected late in 2005.

In the ninth and tenth chapters the stories about Eastern and Western female leaders are presented. Their number in the Eastern bloc was smaller than in Western countries. This can be explained by the fact that while Communist Parties were in power, no women gained top political leadership, apart from Milka Planinc, who came into power at the end of the communist rule in Yugoslavia under special circumstances. However, women started to succeed after 1982, during democratisation processes or the transition between regimes. One of them was Vaira Vike-Freiberg. With her election as the president of Latvia, the post-Soviet period was over. Even though she lacked political experience, the fact that she had nothing to do with the Communist Party was enough. It was praiseworthy that during her rule the number of women in parliament and cabinet increased. It was undoubtedly easier for women to become presidents or PMs in Western countries. From 1960-2010, there were 23 women at the top in 15 countries. On the one hand, they were often discriminated against and harassed. For instance, Edith Cresson, the former minister of agriculture in France, was at the time not allowed to participate in breakfast meetings

with the PM. On the other hand, some of them became national leaders of great importance and respect, such as Angela Merkel. Additionally, thanks to her, Germany became an international defender of women's rights.

The eleventh and twelfth chapters present the conclusion of Skard's book. While the eleventh chapter is the summary of all regional chapters, the twelfth consists of trend analysis and recommendations on how to introduce women-friendly policies to improve the status of women. If trends continue at this rate, it will take 200 years to get to a 50/50 representation ratio. Therefore, introducing quotas is of great importance, and Nordic countries are the absolute pioneers with seven female national leaders. To successfully implement quotas, institutional changes are crucial and have to be based on changes in political culture and political parties. In her final statement Skard points out again how fundamental female contribution is for the further development of democracy and the preservation of peace.

The book "Women of Power: Half a century of female presidents and prime ministers" represents an excellent academic source for both students of gender studies and international relations. It is also an interesting read for those either considering or analyzing careers of female politicians. Skard provides a lot of information on each of the 73 female leaders, bringing a reader closer to these complex personalities. One possible obstacle to an eager reader may be the book's length of 500 pages which could prove exhausting for some. However, it is worth noting that each chapter can be read separately. Skard made a genuine effort in writing this book – gathering information so consistently, without missing a single detail, is truly impressive and admirable.

*Apolonija Rihtarić<sup>1</sup>*

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1 GONG; apolonijari@gmail.com